

Coleccion Aruba: Intersectoral Collaboration on Aruba as a Model for the (Dutch) Caribbean

A collaborative approach for preservation and access of collections in small island states

Drs. R. R. Hernandez¹ (Aruba) and drs. J. P. Scholing² (Aruba)

Introduction³

The goal of this paper is to present and promote intersectoral collaboration, both *intra-insular* (on each island) and *inter-insular* (between the islands). This collaboration as an alternative to the single-focus, *intersectoral* collaboration proposed by the working group for the topic at hand, “slavery in the Dutch Caribbean and commemoration thereof”.

In the next few paragraphs, we'll explain how significant progress was made in Aruba to preserve and share historical and cultural materials. Our goal with this collaboration is to

¹ Drs. R. R. (Raymond) Hernandez is a Historian. He is currently the Director of the Archivo Nacional Aruba (National Archives of Aruba) - raymond.hernandez@aruba.gov.aw.

² Drs. J.P. (Peter) Scholing is an Information Scientist. He is currently a Researcher at Biblioteca Nacional Aruba, (National Library of Aruba), member of the Aruban National Commission for UNESCO and President of MOWLAC (The Regional Committee for UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme for Latin America and the Caribbean) - p.scholing@bibliotecanacional.aw.

³ We would like to start this paper with a note: Although we have been asked by the “Interinsular Overleg” working group to contribute with separate papers regarding the (theoretical) benefits of inter-island collaboration between organizations in only our own fields of expertise (respectively archives and libraries) we have chosen to write a paper jointly, not only focusing on documentary heritage (archives and libraries) but also on the benefits of a wider intersectoral cultural/heritage collaboration, taking as an example the steps taken and the accomplishments already made on Aruba.

encourage historical research, cultural activities, and education while addressing challenges common in small island communities. Instead of acting separately like isolated islands, institutions and individuals decided to work together and combine their efforts, not just for the specific occasion of the "year of the commemoration of the abolition of slavery," but for a broader and more long-lasting purpose.

The outcomes of this collaboration go beyond just a digital cultural heritage portal called "Coleccion Aruba." These partnerships and additional projects make it possible for information about Aruba's history, heritage, and culture to be accessible in homes, schools, and research institutions in Aruba and beyond. This also puts Aruba and its heritage institutions on the international stage.

We call this collaborative approach the "Aruba Model," and we want to present it as a potential model for others in the (Dutch) Caribbean. It's not a short-term effort limited to a specific topic or event like the "Interinsulair Overleg" or the commemoration of the slavery past. Instead, it's a broader and more permanent way of working that can apply to all areas of interest.

Coleccion Aruba as a model for collaboration for sustainable access ... and beyond

The plan to make Aruba's historical and cultural materials available digitally began before the COVID pandemic and long before the discussion about commemorating the abolition of slavery in the Dutch West Indian colonies, which happened 160 years ago in 1863.

The institutions responsible for preserving Aruba's historical documents, the Biblioteca Nacional Aruba (BNA) and the National Archive of Aruba (ANA), had been scanning and digitizing their materials for more than ten years before the "Coleccion Aruba" project even started.

The Biblioteca Nacional Aruba (BNA) has been sharing its materials with the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) for more than ten years. In March 2019, they started their own digital collection called the "BNA Coleccion Digital." They built it using the Internet Archive⁴, technology. This was done to make their large collection of digital and born-digital materials more organized and easier to handle. It also helped them become less reliant on outside groups to manage their digital materials daily.

⁴ The Internet Archive is an American digital library founded on May 10, 1996, providing free access to collections of digitized materials including websites, software applications, music, audiovisual and print materials. <https://archive.org>.

One might wonder why it took a while, especially when you compare it to bigger organizations. Well, like many small institutions, both BNA and ANA faced challenges. They had limitations when it came to resources, budgets, and staff.

Digitization and digital access require specific equipment and specialized staff, which are not always available in (single/individual) institutions. Digital access traditionally depends on a big budget and usually involves acquiring a license from a commercial digital (archival or documentary) platform provider, a large server budget for the hosting of high-quality/resolution digital heritage materials, and in case of increasing popularity, a budget for covering the costs associated with bandwidth and internet traffic. None of these elements were available at either BNA or ANA. Close collaboration, resource sharing, and continuous knowledge exchange solved the staff and equipment aspect. The technical (online) aspect was solved by partnering with the Internet Archive in 2018-2019, which made hosting and serving all these materials a nearly zero-cost endeavor.

But its timing was, in hindsight, exactly right: broad digital access was realized in 2019, just before the global COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Paardenbaai Coleccion Aruba

Busca den e coleccionnan documental, cultural y historico di Aruba

Archivo Nacional Aruba (1324 items)
 Biblioteca Nacional Aruba (2012 items)
 UNOCA (249 items)
 Museo Arkeologico Nacional Aruba (201 items)
 Plantage Zorg en Hoop (2882 items)
 Stichting Monumentenfonds Aruba (2421 items)

Click riba un logo di un di e partnerman pa browse den nan coleccion, of por browse den [Coleccion Aruba](#) completo.

Actualmente Coleccion Aruba tin un total di **71897** items:
 38479 text documents, 32750 images, 666 videos, 46 audio files, 58 audio collections

Nobo: [Database di Personanan Sclavisa na Aruba 1840-1863](#)

Coleccionnan den spotlight:

De Curaçao's Courant (Koninklijke Bibliotheek) (2024 items)
 Collectie Wereldculturen - Aruba (1300 items)
 Slavernij - Slavery (249 items)
 Het Boy Ecury en familie Ecury Archief (1902-2011) (826 items)
 Fraters van Tilburg - Collectie Caribisch Erfgoed (248 items)
 Nelson Morris Picture Collection (202 items)
 Koninklijke Verzamelingen - Aruba (23 items)

Institucionnan Partner

Archivo Nacional Aruba
 Biblioteca Nacional Aruba
 UNOCA
 Museo Arkeologico Nacional Aruba
 Stichting Monumentenfonds Aruba
 Plantage Zorg en Hoop (NL)

Institucionnan cu a contribui cu contenido

Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NL)
 Koninklijke Bibliotheek (NL)
 Nationaal Archief (NL)
 Stedsmuseum Tilburg / Fraters van Tilburg (NL)
 Koninklijke Verzamelingen (NL)
 Algemene Rekenkamer Aruba

Contenido

Home
 Browse all collections
 Browse all texts/documents
 Browse all images
 Browse all videos
 Browse all audio
 Latest additions

Cu sosten di

ADA
 Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds
 Mondriaan fund
 Internet Archive

coleccion av - Un solo portal pa e herencia documental y audiovisual di Aruba.
 Mas informacion for partner: [Tuma contacto cu nos](#)

The online availability of the digital BNA collection has had a major impact, especially thanks to the pandemic. The responses were diverse and from different regions. The digital accessibility of this can be seen in the figures. Whereas in the past, the sources could only be physically consulted in Aruba, were made available online. During the pandemic, for example, a “*yiù di tera*” (“country child”) studying in the Netherlands, could use the available online information from Aruba, to write their thesis from the Netherlands⁵. Digital transformation and universal access has its impact not only in Aruba but also outside of our island.

In 2022, the Archivo Nacional Aruba (ANA) followed the digital online accessibility by launching portions of its collections as a parallel collection to BNA’s digital collection, also by using the Internet Archive’s infrastructure.

In October of 2022 ANA and BNA, both government institutions, joined forces with a third Aruban institution, a cultural foundation *Union di Organisacionnan Cultural Arubano* (UNOCA), by signing a Memorandum of Understanding to formalize their collaboration. The focus was on making their joint collections that contains a wealth of information about not only Aruba’s history, heritage and culture, but also of the wider (Caribbean) region, **available online**, without limitations, via a single portal, the “Coleccion Aruba” platform, available at <https://coleccion.aw>.

The Coleccion Aruba is a special project that wants to keep and share the history and traditions of Aruba and the broader Caribbean. Due to its collaborative aspects, this project represents a big effort between cultural and heritage partners in Aruba as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS). Due to this open and collaborative nature, and “low cost, high impact” aspects it has the potential to become a model for cultural heritage initiatives in small island states, highlighting the importance of partnerships and community engagement in promoting sustainable development and cultural preservation.⁶

While on the one hand, the project focuses on the digitization and preservation of historic documents, photographs, and artifacts, on the other it focuses on the digitalization of the digitized cultural heritage for sharing information and contributing to research, educational programs, creative projects (for the so-called orange industry). This project helps to promote a better understanding and appreciation of the region's cultural heritage.

The project has also facilitated the development of partnerships with local institutions and communities, who have been actively involved in documenting and preserving their cultural traditions. These partnerships are extending beyond the boundaries of the island nation of

⁵ Jan Bant, *Un ramo sosyal izkyerdista: De visie van Feneta en Skol i Komunidat op dekolonisatie, 1969-1986* (2021). <https://coleccion.aw/show/?BNA-DIG-TESIS-BANT-JAN-2021>

⁶ This model applies not only to SIDS but also for smaller (regional and local) institutions in remote areas in both developing and developed countries of the world.

Aruba to the wider Dutch Kingdom and hopefully to that of the Caribbean region as the next logical step.

In the midst of all this, we have to recognize the reality of small island states, e.g. the Caribbean, as well as the need for us as developing countries to decolonize our mindset, and to focus on mutual assistance and inter-institutional cooperation, instead of a costly contract with an international commercial services provider, oftentimes financed by (single-source) funding or “aid” exclusively from the “mother country”, which many similar projects in SIDS/former colonies seem to be based on. This way of doing things goes against the idea of making organizations and digital projects strong and long-lasting. It often leads to problems in the long run when the initial funding runs out and the island institutions must finish and manage the projects on their own.

Quoting from a report that resulted from such a project of mutual inter-island assistance, written by the National Archives of Aruba for their records management colleagues from the government of St. Maarten: “We acknowledge the fact that, as small island states, we have common problems and limitations (lack of equipment, personnel, and funding) regarding the new digital era. But with the necessary creativity and cooperation, we can work towards practical solutions to be in the running and make information more accessible in this evolving technological world.”⁷

The Coleccion Aruba as well as the participating organizations ANA, BNA, and UNOCA engaged with Coleccion Aruba, are thereby also collaborating in achieving goals 4, 9, 10, 11, 16, and 17 of the SDGs⁸. This parallel working method is possible because culture is the driver and key to achieving the World Sustainable Development Goals: “Culture-forward solutions can ensure the success of interventions to achieve the SDGs”.⁹ The creation of this collaborative platform is part of the digital culture era (or e-culture) that is evolving.

⁷ Archivo Nacional Aruba, *Advisory report regarding the safeguarding, digitizing, and digital accessibility of St. Maarten's (historical) archival materials* (August 2022). This report was performed by the section Archive Preservation and Management of the National Archives of Aruba (ANA) at the request of the Government of St. Maarten.

⁸ Peter Scholing, “Aruba's National Digital Collection Platform. Providing Access to Documentary and Audiovisual Heritage Materials” (Research Poster, ACURIL, 2019). <https://coleccion.aw/show/?BNA-DIG-ACURIL2019-POSTER-SCHOLING-BNA>

⁹ “Culture: at the heart of SDGs” (UNESCO, 2017). <https://en.unesco.org/courier/april-june-2017/culture-heart-sdgs>

The limitations of our Caribbean reality: The driving force in the search for viable solutions

Before looking at the developments in the cultural heritage sector concerning the subject of digitization we should first outline the framework of our situation that limited and still is limiting our potential. In a way, most of the time we are told, or we accept that this is "our inconvenient truth". But we can make the breakthrough ourselves, breaking with "what the past has created for us", and breaking with dependent or one-way relationships within the Kingdom, which the proponents of the dependency theory (amidst our boundaries and abroad) tell us and is present in all aspects of (professional) life, including our field of work.

Without a doubt, our Caribbean reality includes the facts of our colonial past (our history and heritage) and of being small-scale economies (our limitation). Both facts are aspects we do have to deal with. While the first one regards our mindset (and the mindset of those at "the center"), the second one has more to do with the consequences of our small scale.

This outlined reality, due to the limited resources available, also leads to a shortage of specialized human resources and the limited availability of a range of IT specialties for this sector.

In addition, the resources become more limited, if we consider the recent natural disasters in the area and the ongoing climate changes and for which the UN(ESCO) advocates for actions to be taken to safeguard our (in)tangible cultural heritage.

The situation has become worse with the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. The cultural-historical sector suffered worldwide from the pandemic, the lockdown that followed, and the financial challenges that came as a result. More was demanded of our institutions to continue to provide information, but digitally, since these centers were closed.

The pandemic has shown us how vulnerable small states like ours can be. And for our institutions, the implications are all the worse at the micro level, as in this situation these institutions are described as not vital or non-essential. Cuts in resources and, in some cases, staff followed, restricting as a result the provision of services/information to the public.

This situation has led us, more than ever before, to recognize that cooperation and mutual assistance are the driving forces for our survival and progress. Constraints breed creativity.

In our case, this meant that we opted for working according to a "low cost, high quality/impact" model. For example, regarding digitization, we have chosen to focus on using already existing and proven technologies and open platforms, to make ourselves as visible as possible in the digital world. We looked for the best practices from other institutions elsewhere and implemented them. As separate heritage institutions in Aruba, we may have started the process of digitization of our own, but, by accepting our limitations, we chose to move towards

more cooperation amongst ourselves, to pool resources and to share knowledge from between institutions, and where necessary also from outside our borders.

Therefore, our aim is to achieve the highest possible product result to serve not only the individual Aruban citizens but the whole community in general. And the idea is not only to offer the product physically or digitally at our institutions, but also online.

In October 2022 the intention was to extend this cooperation further with other institutions in Aruba and beyond. Not even a year later this is now well underway in the right direction, with the participation of several other institutions, from the GLAM sector, not only in Aruba but also in the boundaries of the Dutch Kingdom. On the 28th of September 2023 this extended cooperation with other institutions like the National Archaeology Museum, The Monuments Fund, the University of Aruba, and Telearuba (the national broadcasting company) and Coleccion Aruba will be officially launched, both as a digital platform and as a national digital heritage collaboration network. A platform and a network, which other organizations can also join, and which represents a model that can extend (or be applied) beyond Aruba's borders as well.

Of note to mention, within the context of the islands' collections being spread geographically within all corners of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and beyond are the digital contributions of Stadsmuseum Tilburg with the Friars of Tilburg Collection, the archeological and ethnographic artifacts and photographs contributed by the Dutch Museum of World Cultures (from Leiden and Amsterdam) as well as those of the Royal Library (Koninklijke Bibliotheek) and the National Archives of the Netherlands, as well as the Royal Collections (Koninklijke Verzamelingen), all in The Hague, to the Coleccion Aruba can also be reported, as that of the vast (photographic) collections about Aruba, the Dutch Caribbean and Suriname contributed by Plantage Zorg en Hoop, an influential architectural and archeological research bureau based in the Netherlands. The puzzle pieces that constitute our islands' memories and our shared memories are scattered through a diaspora of their own. Only through digitization and collaboration, we can easily "bring them home" and make them available in their original, local context, in a richer and more relevant context than they can be in their current physical or digital holding locations.

The shared vision that we call the "Aruba Model" is based on a generational policy, according to which the interests of future generations must be taken into account in our actions in the present.¹⁰ If we paraphrase a well-known (Indian) saying, we have not inherited our cultural and national heritage from our (pre-) parents, but it is borrowed from our children.¹¹ That's why we need to make sure that what we create today, even in digital form, can be passed down to future generations in a way that lasts.

¹⁰ *Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid*, Generatiebewust Beleid (Den Haag 1999)

¹¹ "Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the earth from our Ancestors; we borrow it from our Children"

This collaborative approach offers cultural heritage institutions, which are at risk of being left behind due to the lack of resources and manpower, tools, techniques, knowledge, and/or expertise, the opportunity to stay in step with the rapidly changing information era and increasing demands and expectations of our public. The result of this kind of cooperation is an advantage and benefit for both the institutions and the cultural collections of the SIDS.

At the time of writing this paper, the joint *Coleccion Aruba* has reached a total of over 70.000 individual items by the time this paper was written, including nearly 40.000 texts (books, publications, archival items, manuscripts), totaling nearly a million pages of text, of which over half is in Papiamentu, making *Coleccion.aw* the largest online text corpus for the Papiamentu language. It also includes over 30,000 images and over 500 videos, and it includes materials from an increasing number of partners, with content about and from not just Aruba itself, but also from the region, and from all parts of the Dutch Kingdom.

What started as a collaboration of a digital nature now extends, besides the digital level, to the physical preservation level of our cultural heritage. Since we realize that the sustainable preservation of our physical cultural and historical heritage is equally or even more important than the sustainable preservation of our digitized heritage. That's why, parallel to our joint efforts on the topics, we strongly advocate for the realization of a joint cultural heritage center as well, in order to safeguard our analog and physical heritage materials and to further centralize and optimize shared (digitization and preservation) resources and efforts. This additional focus on the importance of preserving the original, physical, records as well was also emphasized by the Dutch member of Parliament Renske Leijten in her motion during the debate on slavery in January of this year.¹²

Our Caribbean reality is that we live on islands. We also know that on the national level, we as institutions most of the time act like islands. That is why we must stop being islands on an island. Therefore, we must change our way of thinking and our way of doing business. If we want to survive in this rapidly changing world, due to the technological and information development, but also the climatological challenges we face as island nations, we must set our mindset to a more collaborative one. And this is true, not only on a national level but also on a supranational level, e.g. the regional level.

We must reset our mindset by not only decolonizing our minds but also the information that is gathered in other places regarding our history and people. We also must decolonize our minds regarding the way experts, scientists, and high officials in the perceived "center of power" (in this case the Kingdom of the Netherlands, in The Hague), tell us when or how to implement things in the Caribbean, often based on unequal power relations, combined with insufficient knowledge on the existing state of affairs, and levels of innovation and technological ingenuity.

¹² "Motie Leijten": *Gewijzigde motie van het lid Leijten over langdurige Nederlandse betrokkenheid bij het behoud van materieel en immaterieel erfgoed van de slavernij- en koloniale geschiedenis (t.v.v. 36284-6)*, (31 Januari 2023) <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/moties/detail?id=2023Z01348&did=2023D03168>

We have plenty of historical examples of offers for “support” and “solutions” that were offered and that were not sustainable, due to this. Oftentimes these “solutions” resulted in the creation of skewed and dependent relations, followed by the running out of resources over time or the pullback of support from abroad, leaving just a white elephant the island could not take care of.

Coleccion Aruba as a model for thematic and project-based collaboration: the slavery case

Just like how we weren't ready for the COVID pandemic, some other important choices we made in 2019 and the years leading up to it helped us when the Dutch government said they would have a "commemoration year for the end of slavery in the Kingdom of the Netherlands" in 2023 and 2024.

Here's an interesting example: a new technology was introduced, and it had the potential to be a game-changer for accessing historical records from all over the world. Unlike previous technologies that required big investments and were mainly used by large institutions with a lot of money, this new technology was also accessible to small institutions in small island nations that were good at embracing innovation.

In 2019, a new technology called "Transkribus," which uses Artificial Intelligence (AI), was made available to the public. It promised to do for handwritten texts what OCR (Optical Character Recognition) did for printed texts and what search engines do for the Internet: make historical documents and archives accessible with word-for-word search. Until recently, when archival documents were digitized and put online, you had to look through the scanned images one by one, which was like using old-fashioned microfiche or microfilm readers from the past.

Even today, many National Archives and similar institutions worldwide have invested a lot of resources in using HTR (handwritten text recognition) to process their scanned archival materials. However, most of them haven't been able to share these results with their users online, especially in a way that combines digital materials (both printed and OCR-ed¹³) and born-digital materials into one search that uses keywords to find everything at once.

In the fall of 2019 along with the “big” institutions anywhere else in the world, the National Library of Aruba was (one of) the first in the region to recognize the implications of this new technology, especially for manuscripts and archival holdings. Through the existing close collaboration with the Aruban National Archives, the first findings were shared instantly, and after selecting a set of archival records from ANA, the next day the results were ready and readable. For both the BNA and the ANA, this was a great breakthrough, because this meant

¹³ Optical Character Recognition (OCR) is the process that converts an image of text into a machine-readable text format. <https://aws.amazon.com/what-is/ocr/>

that we could transcribe all our handwritten archives via this new HTR technology that was as readily available to small island institutions as it was to the “traditional” first-adopters of technologies elsewhere.

While it would take a person more than a lifetime to transcribe the (handwritten) colonial archives (of which most are difficult-to-read texts) preserved in the National Archives of Aruba, implementing this technology would mean that we could make our colonial archive readable and searchable within a timespan of only two years. But even “available” technology requires more than just agility and “early adoption” requires an investment: 1) everything needs to be digitized first, and 2) even technology like Transkribus comes at a (albeit relatively small) cost and needs people to operate it¹⁴.

Digitization of Slavery (Re)sources: making the Colonial Archive of Aruba accessible online

So, in 2019, we had some plans, but then COVID-19 came along, and it affected everything, including the cultural heritage sector. The whole country had to show how strong and adaptable it was.

When the lockdowns happened, people wanted more information, and they wanted it online because everything was closed. Libraries and archives were asked to keep giving out information even when they couldn't open their doors. It became normal for information to be in digital form.

Once the pandemic and lockdown permitted we sought opportunities to make our information accessible at an increasing rate. BNA made all of their digital-born newspapers available online, made local books written in Papiamentu available for use during the (virtual) final exams while schools were still closed,¹⁵ and held crowdsourcing campaigns where the public could help recognize and describe people and scenes from their Lago Refinery Collections¹⁶, while ANA made the first steps to make the colonial archive of Aruba accessible with the new HTR (Handwritten Text Recognition) technology, actively seeking funding to make this a reality.

With the support of Fundacion Amigonan di Archivo¹⁷ (Foundation Friends of the Archive, ADA), as well as other co-funding organizations, such as the Mondriaan Fund and VNO (Vertegenwoordiging van Nederland in Aruba), the ANA was able to launch a project called

¹⁴ It costs 1 euro cent to HTR one page. Signing up for Transkribus is free, and you get the first 500 credits free, but then you must buy the next credits.

¹⁵ “When An Island Shuts Down: Aruba & the National Emergency Library” (May 2020)
<https://blog.archive.org/2020/05/18/when-an-island-shuts-down-aruba-the-national-emergency-library/>

¹⁶ ‘Yuda pone number na e “Caranan di LAGO”’ (November 2020)
https://www.gobierno.aw/actualidad/noticia_47171/item/yuda-pone-number-na-e-caranan-di-lago_55237.html

¹⁷ The Fundacion Amigonan di Archivo, Friends of the Archive, was established in 2005 to support the ANA in their archival work.

“Restauration, digitaliseren en digitaal toegankelijk maken van het archief van de Arubaanse Commandeurs en Gezaghebber over de periode 1816 – 1939 (1945)”.¹⁸

The "Aruba Colonial Archives Project" isn't just about putting old handwritten documents from the colonial times online. It's also about making them easy to search. The main goal is to share new information and maybe learn more about Aruba's history, especially the part about slavery. We want to make the entire Colonial Archives available online for everyone. These archives mostly have handwritten papers, which can be hard to read because the paper has changed color over time, and the handwriting itself can be tricky to decipher.

As I mentioned earlier, putting our colonial archives online means that anyone, like researchers, students, museum experts, and even descendants, can look things up from anywhere in the world. We've made these archives easier to use with a special software called Transkribus, and by putting them on our Coleccion Aruba platform. This way, these archives will always be there for people to access.

The importance of this project is to make all “Aruban” archives (those physically held in Aruba, the Netherlands, Curacao, and elsewhere) relating to the administration of Aruba during the Colonial period, available to everybody interested. The goal of this digital collection platform and information portal is to bring together and share online all of Aruba's historical and cultural stuff that's spread out across different islands, countries, and places around the world.

Through this project and with the necessary financial support we have been able to start the widespread application of this new technology, which will not only lead to more publicity and accessibility of our colonial archives but will also bring new light on unenlightened aspects of our history, like slavery history. So, we can talk about rewriting our own history. When we get our already digitized colonial archives at the National Archives in the Netherlands, we can, even after applying the HTR application, begin to better describe our (shared) history.

As part of the 160th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Kingdom, the ANA has also planned to complete the archives up to 1875 before the end of 2023 and make them available online. Since June, we have had all colonial archives up to 1863 digitally available and searchable. With the generous contribution of the National Archives of the Netherlands, we have begun to receive the “Aruban” sections of the colonial records held in the Hague and will receive the pre-1828 colonial records soon as well, once they have also been digitized.

As a side note: many National Archives and similar institutions worldwide have put a lot of effort into using HTR (handwritten text recognition) to process their scanned archive materials. However, most of them haven't been able to share these results with users online, especially not in a way that integrates with other digital resources together with digital (print-based and

¹⁸ The restoration, digitizing, and making digitally accessible the Aruban Commanders and Lt. Governors archive for the period 1816-1939 (1945) – in short, the Aruba Colonial Archives Project.

OCR-ed¹⁹) and born-digital materials being available for keyword, based through a single full-text search option. Most institutions' scanned archives are presently only available in a modern-day browser-based version of the microfilm/microfiche reader, available only with a lot of clicking and a lot of patience, flipping through the images one by one.

Working with the Internet Archive, the documents in Coleccion Aruba are among the first in the world to be available like this. You can search the entire text, thanks to Artificial Intelligence. This happened because a small island nation was quick to work together and be flexible.

At the same time, the documents we've already put on Coleccion Aruba are being used by Dutch researchers, including those from Radboud University. They're using these documents to create a database about enslaved people in the Dutch colonies in the West Indies. The part related to Aruba was launched on June 30, 2023. It's not only available in Dutch on the National Archive of the Netherlands website but, more importantly, on the same day, it was also made available for Arubans through the Coleccion Aruba platform. It's in both Papiamentu and Dutch to make it easier for people in Aruba to access and understand, both for the public and researchers.

Additionally, we're working on a better way to show information about the "Aruban slaves." Instead of just showing how they are listed in records, we want to tell their life stories and their family connections (when we know them) on Aruba and other islands. We're using the same dataset we made with Radboud University for this, and we're currently planning and testing how to do it.

It's important to mention that these projects can be done again and again. Other countries and groups in the Dutch Caribbean can also use this model to better understand our shared history. We hope that similar projects to digitize archives in other parts of the Dutch Kingdom can be started using this approach. This would involve working with the National Archives in the Netherlands, the National Archive of Curaçao, and the Records Management of St. Maarten. The goal is to connect these important collections to other historical and cultural resources from institutions on each island and link them together.

¹⁹ Optical Character Recognition (OCR) is the process that converts an image of text into a machine-readable text format. <https://aws.amazon.com/what-is/ocr/>

Building on a “Model Aruba” – the path taken to more formal cooperation within the heritage sector

Because of the teamwork between ANA and BNA, Aruba got a spot on the internet. In early 2019, the BNA digital collection started on Internet Archive (archive.org), and in April 2022, ANA's digital collection joined. After that, UNOCA and other partner institutions joined too. This means we've started building a place online where everyone can see Aruba's culture and history together in one spot, and it's here to stay.

The partnership we talked about earlier was just the start of Coleccion Aruba. We want many more groups to join this project. The plan is to keep growing and working together with even more organizations. The more groups that come on board, the more information will be there for everyone to see in one spot.

However, partnerships go beyond making collections available in one place to the public. The partnership that underlies the “Aruba Model” extends also to sharing information, knowledge, skills, and resources (equipment, buildings, manpower, et cetera).

The “Aruba Model” is a model that can be applied to the Dutch Caribbean on the one hand, but also for the Caribbean region in which we find ourselves. This model can be applied for remote regional areas in even big countries, where institutions have little or no resources.

Our island's governments and societies are ultimately jointly responsible for preserving our (in)tangible cultural heritage, for both the current and future generations. But we think that also the Dutch government needs to be part of this endeavor since we are dealing with a joint history and cultural heritage, and with a joint future.

Conclusion

To sum it up, by establishing the Coleccion Aruba, we've developed what we call the "Aruba Model." We believe this model can be used not only in the Dutch Caribbean but also throughout the entire Kingdom of the Netherlands. We share a common history and cultural heritage, making this approach relevant to our collective past. Ideally, we can expand this model to benefit a broader Caribbean region by collaborating with all Caribbean countries.

Currently, islands in the Dutch Caribbean don't often work together on archive and library matters; it happens by chance. But by looking at the successful Aruba Model, we propose that other Dutch Caribbean regions can do something similar. This means that each island can create a network to help each other out. And when we look at the bigger picture of the Dutch

Caribbean, all the islands can share their knowledge and experience, so we don't have to keep starting from scratch. By working together, we can tackle projects while considering our limited resources in the heritage field. We believe that the technical platform and approach used by Aruba can be a great starting point for this collaboration, and Aruba is willing to assist other islands and their institutions that want to adopt this model.

The "Aruba Model" we're talking about in this paper isn't a strict central system; it's more like a group of institutions working together like a network. Each organization takes care of its own stuff, but they all share information and help each other out. This way, they can overcome many of the challenges in preserving and accessing historical things.

However, there's still a need for money, especially when it comes to protecting physical historical items.

We want to emphasize that even though this model might seem like a digital idea, we still need to protect the actual physical stuff. Currently, in Aruba, we don't have a suitable place to keep important papers, valuable historical collections, videos, museum items, and old things. That's why we keep saying it's crucial to have a shared storage space. This is not just important for today's researchers but also for those who come after us in the next 50 years. They'll still need this information, so it's vital to preserve our culture and history.

The importance of preserving our material and immaterial heritage relating to slavery was also highlighted in the "Pleidooi" document as well as in the resolution of Leijten c.s.

It is important to recognize the saying on our islands that "the sky is not the limit", considering our limited financial and human resources. Therefore, we must be creative. This forces us if we want to succeed, to work according to another concept or saying: "If it cannot be done as it should be done, then it must be done as it can be done." Standing still with hands folded over each other, hoping for a miracle was and is not an option for both our institutions (as well as many others in the heritage sector in Aruba).

That's why we should act now. We should think about the big picture but start by making changes in our own area. This way, we can make our presence known internationally and grow like the bigger countries, so we don't get left behind.

As we've mentioned before, we must acknowledge that we are small islands. To make progress, we need to change the way we think, not just by freeing our minds from colonial influences but also by examining how information about us is collected in the Americas and Europe. We should also be cautious about blindly following solutions suggested by experts from big institutions. Instead, we should find the best solutions that work for our unique Caribbean situation and are sustainable for us.

Based on our experiences, we're ready to share what we've learned with our fellow Caribbean neighbors, beginning with the former Netherlands Antilles. This reminds us of a saying at the monument in Curaçao, which goes, "Supporting themselves but with the willingness to help

each other." It's a quote from a radio message Queen Wilhelmina delivered from London on December 6, 1942, about the process of ending colonial rule in the colony that was then called the "Colony of Curacao." In simpler words, it means "Together we are stronger."

"Aruba, September 2023.